



Geisel Library

William Pereira · San Diego, CA · 1970

The campus of the University of California San Diego showcases a collection of daring Brutalist buildings designed by local luminaries like Robert Mosher, A. Quincy Jones, and Robert Alexander. However, situated among these architectural marvels, is one highlight in particular—William Pereira’s Geisel Library. Named after the artist and author Theodor Seuss Geisel, aka Dr. Seuss, a longtime San Diego resident and supporter of the project, the eight-story ziggurat-like structure is an icon of late modernism. Resembling a spaceship that’s hovering above the university and accessed via the picturesque Literary Walk, it is truly unique.

In designing the Geisel, Pereira’s goal was to push beyond the predictability and strict functionality that characterized libraries of this period, which he described as “memorials with formidable walls and a great sense of containment.” Conversely, the architect carved out diversified, free-flowing spaces supporting active learning and, as the school put it, “transmitting knowledge rather than storing it away.”

The lower two stories of the reinforced concrete edifice create a pedestal for the six-story, stepped tower, its four sides anchored by angled columns that resemble outstretched hands. The thick frame does the heavy lifting, supporting large windows and column-free spaces, while a ground-floor plaza is carved out under the hovering building. Floors one and two house service desks and staff work areas, while four through eight contain the library’s collection and study spaces. Like much of Pereira’s best work, the project vaulted Brutalism into the realm of dazzling, gravity-defying sculpture.

The building, first called Central Library, was renamed in 1995 for Geisel, who donated 18,000 original drawings, sketches, and manuscripts to the institution. “You can find magic wherever you look. Sit back and relax, all you need is a book,” Geisel once remarked. In 1990, architect Gunnar Birkerts designed a deferential addition to the library, providing two levels of space underground.

Curved concrete columns support the stepped, glass-clad structure—which rises above a plaza and sunken courtyard—like outstretched hands.